

# SEVEN REASONS FOR BELIEVING THAT JAPANESE IS NOT A DIFFICULT LANGUAGE

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It is often said that Japanese is a difficult language to learn. I venture to disagree for the following reasons.

First of all, consider pronunciation. Most of the diphthongs and the vague vowels possessed by classical Japanese have disappeared in the modern language. Modern Japanese vowels are articulated in the front of the mouth and are in consequence very clear. To pronounce modern Japanese intelligibly is thus a relatively simple matter. In contrast, the difficulty of achieving accurate pronunciation of the complex vowel system of English is amusingly illustrated by a certain Japanese T.V. commercial. A young Japanese man tries to purchase a bottle of Bourbon, but cannot make himself understood by the American bartender, who keeps replying "What? What?" I feel such a situation would be less likely in reverse.

Secondly, Japanese lacks the masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns which are such an irritating feature of some languages and which so often go against common sense. Many European languages such as Ger-

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man or French come into this category. The German words "Mädchen" and "Fräulein", for example, which mean a girl and a young woman respectively, are not feminine, but neuter nouns. Articles, also differ according to the gender of the noun. English lacks nouns differentiated according to gender, but it does possess a singular-plural distinction, which affects not only nouns but also pronouns such as "this" and "these". Again, Japanese lacks this complicating factor. Suffixes such as the "-domo" of "kodomo" (children), which is generally believed to be a plural marker, are not so much plural markers as markers of the speaker's attitude towards his interlocutor — in other words, a type of "keigo" showing respect or humility. Another point where Japanese is simpler than languages such as English, French, or German, is in its lack of different verb endings for first, second, and third persons, for instance the "-s" which must be added to the third person in English — for example, ("I want," "he wants")

Thirdly, let us consider verb conjugations. When I studied French, it was these which gave me the most headaches. There were so many tenses and conjugations that I was unable to memorize even those in my elementary-level textbook. In comparison, Japanese possesses only a present and a past tense. In order to talk about the future, it is only necessary to add an adverb expressing future meaning, such as "ashita" (tomorrow), to the present tense. To form the past tense is also quite simple, as there is only one basic form, ending in "-ta" or "-da". Indeed, Japanese verb conjugations are so systematic that one might almost imagine Japanese to be an artificially constructed language. Moreover, there are only two classes of verb, and so only two types of conjugation. These conjugations are themselves very regular and easily comprehensible.

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There are in the modern language only two irregular verbs, “kuru” (to come) and “suru” (to do). In contrast, even in English, whose grammar is said to be simple in comparison with French or German, there are features such the usage of “shall” and “will” which I am not persuaded I have mastered, and there are also tenses such as the present and past perfect which are notorious for causing problems to foreign learners. Even in forming something as basic as the past tense of regular verbs, there are various forms to choose from, depending on the verb — whether to add “-ied”, “-ed”, or just “-d”. Irregular verbs also can be classified into a large number of groups, each with a different pattern of conjugation.

In the fourth place, Japanese syntax and word order appear to me relatively clear and plain. For instance, to form a question, it is only necessary to add the particle “-ka” at the end of the sentence, without any change in word order.

Fifthly, modification is relatively simple. To modify a noun by a verb, an adjective, or another noun, it is only necessary to place the dictionary form directly before the relevant noun. As for adverbs, there are no hard and fast rules about their position within the sentence, so that they can generally be placed in one of a number of positions without any syntactic problem.

Sixthly, Japanese has only the following 3 basic sentence patterns:

[N] wa [N] desu.

[N] wa [adj.] desu.

[N] wa [V] -masu.

By combining these skilfully, one may achieve basic communication.

Finally, when connecting one noun to another, one can simply go on as the words come into one's mind, using the particle "no" as many times as one wishes. One could conceivably even make a string of words like the following: "America no Idaho no Lewiston no Lewis-Clark College no Nihongo course no 2-kai no kyōshitsu," meaning, "The second-floor classroom of the Japanese course at Lewis-Clark College in Lewiston, Idaho, U.S.A."

A similarly simple pattern is observable with verbs. All one has to do to join them is to convert each of them into their "-te" form. Only the last verb in the sequence has to have an ending which reflects tense.

So there you have it — seven simple areas of language which, once mastered, will enable you to achieve basic communication in Japanese.

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Seven Reasons for Believing  
That Japanese is not A Difficult Language

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1. Most of the diphthongs and vague vowels have disappeared in modern Japanese. Modern Japanese vowels are articulated in the front of the mouth and are in consequence very clear.
2. Japanese lacks masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns. Articles do not differ according to the gender of the noun. Japanese does not possess a singular-plural distinction.
3. Japanese possesses only a present and a past tense. The conjugations of the verbs are very regular, and there are in modern Japanese only two irregular verbs.
4. To form a question, it is only necessary to add the particle "ka" at the end of the sentence, without any change in word order.
5. To modify a noun by a verb, an adjective, or another noun, it is only necessary to place the dictionary form before the relevant noun.
6. Japanese has only 3 basic sentence patterns.
7. Connecting one noun to another, one can simply go on as the words come into one's minds, using the particle "no".

And verbs also can connect each other in "te" form.